United Nations E/CN.6/2019/NGO/55

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
19 November 2018

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Sixty-third session
11–22 March 2019
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century"

Statement submitted by Sociologists for Women in Society, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.

18-19672 (E) 101218

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Statement

To facilitate the full citizenship and participation of women and girls in social and economic life, robust systems of social protection and public services are essential (Sustainable Development Goal 1.3). Especially vulnerable times include childbirth, childcare, and eldercare when risks and burdens fall disproportionately on women and girls. Women's participation is particularly needed in planning for sustainable, clean infrastructure to safeguard community health and support women's economic participation. During post-conflict reconstruction, women's full participation is critical for effective decision-making and implementation of inclusive systems of social protection, public services, and infrastructure.

Sociologists for Women in Society calls on Member States to pay particular attention to the following provisions for gender equality, female empowerment, and collective well-being:

Provide Job-protected Paid Childbirth Leave

Although most countries have some provision for paid maternity leave, only 41 per cent of new mothers globally receive maternity benefits (International Labour Organization [ILO] 2017, World Social Protection Report 2017-2019). Paid, job-protected leave for mothers - particularly when the leave is limited to six months - encourages female labour force participation and contributes to women's economic independence (Sustainable Development Goal 1.3). Time-off from work to care for new children with a guaranteed return to employment is good for public health, workforce stability, and family economic security. Only two nations have no national mandate for paid maternity leave: the US and Papua New Guinea (ILO, 2017). A growing number of higher-income countries provide paid parental leave to two parents (ILO, 2017). Non-transferrable, well-paid parental leave to two parents encourages caregiving roles for fathers and promotes egalitarianism among couples (Sustainable Development Goal 5.4).

We recommend that all Member States:

- Guarantee paid maternity leave to all mothers of new-borns and newly adopted children, whether in formal or informal employment;
- Enact laws granting well-paid, job-protected parental leave to partners of new mothers;
- Ensure well-paid, job-protected leave for women and their partners to address medical issues surrounding pregnancy and childbirth.

Provide Universal, Quality Child Care

Men and women's labour market outcomes diverge most after the birth or adoption of a new child. In many countries, the contemporary demands of work and absence of adequate state-provided parental supports produce mutually exclusive trade-offs between the need to work and the need to care for young children. State-supported childcare, more than any other family policy, creates options for women to return to work, facilitating higher rates of female labour force participation and thus, supporting women's economic independence. It reduces the gender pay gap, increases female pension resources, and alleviates the financial burden of widowhood at all ages (Sustainable Development Goal 1.3).

Drawing from recommendations by social scientists and family policy experts, we recommend that all Member States:

- Make steps towards provision of state-subsidized early childhood education and care centres with qualified teachers and full placement of all children in need of care;
- Expand state-subsidized child care to include younger children, shortening or eliminating the time between protected/paid parental leave and child placement in public care centres;
- Broaden state-supported before- and after-school care for school-aged children;
- Support well-qualified and well-compensated caregivers within publicly subsidized child care systems.

Provide Job-protected Paid Family Leave

To promote equal and fair labour market participation, it is important to consider that the world of care extends well beyond childbirth leave and child care systems. Children need extra parental attention during illnesses as well as routine healthcare appointments. At the same time, parents often care for elderly members of their families. An aging parent in need of increased support or a sudden disease affecting a family member can wreak havoc in the delicate balance that men and women struggle to maintain between the competing interests of family and work. The best protection for these situations is ample access to paid leave to meet the increased need for care (Sustainable Development Goal 1.3). Recent implementations by states and individual employers show that paid family caregiving leave benefits both workers and employers, lowers welfare costs, and increases family economic security. In addition, it allows female workers, including those in middle age, to remain active in the labour force.

We recommend that all Member States:

- Enact laws granting well-paid, job-protected parental leave to address short-term illnesses and necessities, like caring for a sick child or taking a child to a medical appointment.
- Enact laws granting well-paid, job-protected leave to address medical issues of aging parents or disabled family members, including taking an aging parent to the doctor or addressing a sudden care crisis;
- Design family policies encouraging both women and men to take on caregiving roles and accommodating dual earner-carer adults who participate in both paid work and unpaid caregiving (Sustainable Development Goal 5.4).

Provide Universal Education for all

Girls' education is limited in a number of countries by demands to help with domestic chores, by stereotypes that girls and women do not need education, by financial constraints, and by force. Malala Yousafzai, who was nearly assassinated for advocating for girls' education, is an important example of the difficulties girls face in becoming educated. Universal education is an essential part of the infrastructure for gender equality and female empowerment.

We recommend that all Member States:

- Guarantee universal education from pre-K through high school.
- Provide both practical education and education for critical thinking.
- Eliminate formal and informal school fees (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW], GR 34.43)
- Ensure girls' physical security in travelling to school and on school property.

Support the Development of Sustainable and Clean Infrastructure

Women and girls depend on accessible infrastructure for transportation to wage work and medical care, for market access as producers and consumers, and for safe, convenient water sources. If accessible infrastructure is not available, female economic participation is curtailed, contributing to the gender income gap and reduced resources in elder years, especially for widows. The United Nations recognizes the need for the development of sustainable, safe, and accessible transportation systems, housing, and green spaces for all (Sustainable Development Goals 11). Additionally, through the Sustainable Development Goals 9, member states have agreed to the 2030 goal to increase efficiency and adopt "clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes." These two goals work together to provide clean, sustainable infrastructure for urban, peri-urban, and rural areas. Development in these areas must recognize the hidden inequalities of gender, income, ethnicity, age, disabilities, and geographic location.

We recommend that all Member States:

- Assess the impacts of energy-extraction industries (including coal, natural gas, and solar), on nearby communities, workers, and consumers, disaggregating results by gender, class, ethnicity, and location.
- Establish national plans to support full democratic participation of all people, especially women, in development plans for new infrastructure, including discussions of who controls energy sources, which energy sources are prioritized, and how transportation and housing can be improved.
- Establish national plans to increase the number of women who enter Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, (STEM) fields, including educational programs categorized under new "green" sustainability jobs.
- Ensure support for small-scale farmers, including female farmers, and a diverse, affordable supply of local food production, with resources allocated for protecting biodiversity and clean water sources.

Promote and Protect the Rights of Women During Post-Conflict Reconstruction

Conflict situations disrupt social protection systems, public services, and infrastructure. Women and girls especially bear the brunt of violent conflict but also have a vital role to play in reconstruction processes. United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) asserts that the participation of women and attention to their rights and status are critical to national peace and reconstruction processes. Women's participation facilitates safe communities that positively impact health, education, and overall well-being of women and girls.

To avoid perpetuating inequality and discrimination during reconstruction, we recommend that all Member States:

- Design reconstruction programs based on human rights principles;
- Include diverse constituents of women in post-reconstruction planning, budgeting, implementation and monitoring-evaluation;
- Build strong national women's machineries, and ensure coherence between technical assistance needs for capacity-building and the provision of resources for reconstruction;
- Actively engage men working with women in the process of change and develop their capacity to understand the value of, and actively support, women's empowerment for economic and social development;

- Provide gender-advisory capacity and gender-sensitivity training for staff in all peace missions and processes; and
- Develop gender-responsive approaches early to policy formulation, budget allocations and monitoring, including through the collection and use of sex-disaggregated data.

Sociologists for Women in Society educates, conducts research, and creates feminist social change to advance gender and other social equalities.